CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1.   An apparatus for sharing media content among peers over a communication medium, comprising:

a receiver configured to automatically receive media content from at least one preauthorized sender over a communication medium;

a data storage element associated with said receiver and configured to store said received media content; and

a user interface associated with said receiver and configured to provide access to said received media content by selection of a virtual channel by a user;

wherein selection of said virtual channel results in retrieval of said received media content from said data storage element for playback.

2.   An apparatus as recited in claim 1, further comprising:

means for automatically authenticating media content arriving at said receiver for storage within said data storage element in response to a determination as to whether said content is from a preauthorized sender.

3.   An apparatus as recited in claim 2, wherein said determination of a preauthorized sender is performed in response to a source address of said received media content.

4.   An apparatus as recited in claim 3, wherein said source address comprises an address transmitted over said communication medium.

5.   An apparatus as recited in claim 4, wherein said address comprises a phone number or internet protocol (IP) address.

6.   An apparatus as recited in claim 2, wherein said determination of a preauthorized sender is performed in response to an identifier known by said means

for automatically authenticating which of said media content arriving at said receiver is to be stored within said data storage element in response to a determination as to whether said content is from a preauthorized sender.

7. An apparatus as recited in claim 6, wherein said identifier is selected from the group consisting essentially of a username, user code, unit code, password code, identifier from a smart card, biometric identifier, and combinations thereof.

8. An apparatus as recited in claim 1, further comprising means for providing notification of media content having been stored on said content storage element.

9. An apparatus as recited in claim 8, wherein said media content may be accessed by interacting with said notification.

10. An apparatus as recited in claim 9, wherein said media content is played back in response to user interaction with said notification.

11. An apparatus as recited in claim 8, wherein said notification is presented to said user within a program guide.

12. An apparatus as recited in claim 11, wherein said program guide comprises a listing of channels and associated content, within which a notification of said received media content is presented.

13. An apparatus as recited in claim 8, wherein said notification further comprises a content length value given as a time length value or a file length value.

14. An apparatus as recited in claim 12, wherein said notification further comprises information about when the media content was recorded.

15. An apparatus as recited in claim 12, wherein said notification further comprises information about when the media content was received at said receiver.

16. An apparatus as recited in claim 1, wherein said apparatus is integrated within a device selected from the group consisting essentially of a set-top box, television system, audio system, gaming system, personal computer system, and combinations thereof.

17. An apparatus as recited in claim 1, further comprising:
a transmitter configured for connection to an input element for transmitting said media content from a first peer location to a second peer location over said communication medium; and
means for encoding source address information about said first peer location for transmission with said media content to said second peer location.

18. An apparatus as recited in claim 17, wherein said transmitter is configured for attachment to input elements selected from the group of consisting essentially of a video camera, digital still camera, video recorder, video cassette recorder, video playback system, digital video disk system, audio recording system, audio playback system, and combinations thereof.

19. An apparatus as recited in claim 1, wherein said receiver is connected through said communication medium through a back-channel.

20. An apparatus as recited in claim 1, wherein said communication medium is selected from the group consisting essentially of a telephone network, the Internet, a cable television network, a powerline network, a wireless network, and a directly wired link.

21. An apparatus as recited in claim 1, wherein said data storage element is located on an intermediary server.

22.   An apparatus as recited in claim 1, wherein said data storage element comprises a fixed or removable data storage media.

23.   An apparatus as recited in claim 1, wherein said data storage element comprises a hard disk drive.

24.   An apparatus as recited in claim 1, wherein said means for automatically authenticating media content arriving at said receiver for storage within said data storage element in response to a determination as to whether said media content is from a preauthorized sender comprises:

a computer; and

programming executable by said computer for carrying out the operations of

establishing communication with a source of media content over said communication medium,

authenticating the access rights of said source as a user selected peer,

initiating a download of said media content from said source, and

storing said media content received from said source within said data storage element for user selected playback.

25.   An apparatus for sharing media content among peers over a communication medium, comprising:

a computer;

a data storage element associated with said computer;

programming executable by said computer for carrying out the operations of

establishing a communication link with a source of media content over said communication medium,

automatically authenticating access rights of said source of media content as a user selected peer,

automatically receiving media content from an authenticated source of media content,

automatically storing said media content received from said

authenticated source within said data storage element for user selected playback, and

      providing a user interface associated with said computer and configured to provide access to said received media content by selection of a virtual channel by a user;

wherein selection of said virtual channel results in retrieval of said received media content from said data storage element for playback.

26.   An apparatus as recited in claim 25, wherein authentication of access rights is performed in response to a source address of said media content.

27.   An apparatus as recited in claim 26, wherein said source address comprises an address transmitted over said communication medium.

28.   An apparatus as recited in claim 27, wherein said address comprises a phone number or internet protocol (IP) address.

29.   An apparatus as recited in claim 1, wherein said authentication of access rights is performed in response to a source identifier.

30.   An apparatus as recited in claim 29, wherein said source identifier is selected from the group consisting essentially of a username, user code, unit code, password code, identifier from a smart card, biometric identifier, and combinations thereof.

31.   An apparatus as recited in claim 25, further comprising means for providing notification of media content having been stored on said content storage element.

32.   An apparatus as recited in claim 31, wherein said media content may be accessed by interacting with said notification.

33. An apparatus as recited in claim 32, wherein said media content is played back in response to user interaction with said notification.

34. An apparatus as recited in claim 31, wherein said notification is presented to said user within a program guide.

35. An apparatus as recited in claim 34, wherein said program guide comprises a listing of channels and associated content, within which a notification of said received media content is presented.

36. An apparatus as recited in claim 31, wherein said notification further comprises a content length value given as a time length value or a file length value.

37. An apparatus as recited in claim 35, wherein said notification further comprises information about when the media content was recorded.

38. An apparatus as recited in claim 35, wherein said notification further comprises information about when the media content was received at said receiver.

39. An apparatus as recited in claim 25, wherein said apparatus is integrated within a device selected from the group consisting essentially of a set-top box, television system, audio system, gaming system, personal computer system, and combinations thereof.

40. An apparatus as recited in claim 25, further comprising:
a transmitter configured for connection to an input element for transmitting said media content from a first peer location to a second peer location over said communication medium; and
means for encoding source address information about said first peer location for transmission with said media content to said second peer location.

41.   An apparatus as recited in claim 40, wherein said transmitter is configured for attachment to input elements selected from the group of consisting essentially of a video camera, digital still camera, video recorder, video cassette recorder, video playback system, digital video disk system, audio recording system, audio playback system, and combinations thereof.

42.   An apparatus as recited in claim 25, wherein said computer includes a communication interface connected through said communication medium through a back-channel.

43.   An apparatus as recited in claim 25, wherein said communication medium is selected from the group consisting essentially of a telephone network, the Internet, a cable television network, a powerline network, a wireless network, and a directly wired link.

44.   An apparatus as recited in claim 25, wherein said data storage element is located on an intermediary server.

45.   An apparatus as recited in claim 25, wherein said data storage element comprises a fixed or removable data storage media.

46.   An apparatus as recited in claim 25, wherein said data storage element comprises a hard disk drive.

47.   A computer program carried by computer readable storage media and executable by a computer, said computer program configured to cause said computer to carry out the steps comprising:

establishing a communication link with a source of media content over a communication medium,

automatically authenticating access rights of a source of media content as a user selected peer,

automatically receiving media content from an authenticated source of media content,

automatically storing said media content received from said authenticated source within said data storage element for user selected playback, and

providing a user interface associated with said computer and configured to provide access to said received media content by selection of a virtual channel by a user;

wherein selection of said virtual channel results in retrieval of said received media content from said data storage element for playback.

48. An computer program as recited in claim 47, wherein authentication of access rights is performed in response to a source address of said media content.

49. A computer program as recited in claim 48, wherein said source address comprises an address transmitted over said communication medium.

50. A computer program as recited in claim 49, wherein said address comprises a phone number or internet protocol (IP) address.

51. A computer program as recited in claim 47, wherein said authentication of access rights is performed in response to a source identifier.

52. A computer program as recited in claim 51, wherein said source identifier is selected from the group consisting essentially of a username, user code, unit code, password code, identifier from a smart card, biometric identifier, and combinations thereof.

53. A method for sharing media content among peers over a communication medium, comprising:

establishing a communication link with a source of media content over

a communication medium;

automatically authenticating access rights of a source of media content as a user selected peer;

automatically receiving media content from an authenticated source of media content;

automatically storing said media content received from said authenticated source within said data storage element for user selected playback; and

providing a user interface associated with said computer and configured to provide access to said received media content by selection of a virtual channel by a user;

wherein selection of said virtual channel results in retrieval of said received media content from said data storage element for playback.

54.   A method as recited in claim 53, wherein authentication of access rights is performed in response to a source address of said media content.

55.   A method as recited in claim 54, wherein said source address comprises an address transmitted over said communication medium.

56.   A computer program as recited in claim 55, wherein said address comprises a phone number or internet protocol (IP) address.

57.   A computer program as recited in claim 53, wherein said authentication of access rights is performed in response to a source identifier.

58.   A computer program as recited in claim 57, wherein said source identifier is selected from the group consisting essentially of a username, user code, unit code, password code, identifier from a smart card, biometric identifier, and combinations thereof.